

# Child sex trafficking on rise in Clark County

## Victim recounts nightmarish experience

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“Jennifer,” a Clark County teen formerly involved in prostitution, watches over Portland’s Southeast 82nd Avenue. The motel in the background was once used by prostitutes including Jennifer; it’s now under new management and Portland police say it has not been named in any recent reports of sex trafficking. ([Troy Wayrynen](#)/The Columbian)



Brianna, 19, narrowly escaped being trafficked in 2009 after meeting a man who lured her to Seattle. Two years later, she said she’s still fighting with trust issues, but is finding purpose in studying to become a nurse. ([Troy Wayrynen](#)/The Columbian)



Jennifer walks along Southeast 82nd Avenue near motels and strip clubs where she was lured into dancing and turning tricks. Now 16, the former Clark County girl was sexually trafficked, starting at age 13. Her name is not given to protect her from her former pimp, who is still at large. (Troy Wayrynen/The Columbian)

Jennifer knows the everyday details of being a teenager in rural Clark County: keeping up with grades, answering to a protective mother and sneaking out to college-age parties.

She also knows the grisly life of selling herself on Southeast 82nd Avenue in Portland — for a pimp she thought was her first love.

Just 13 when she met him at a party in Vancouver, Jennifer was attracted to his charisma, good looks and sense of style. He was older — 18 or 19 — which made it all the more exciting, she recalled.

For the first two months, he was sweet and charming. One day, though, things changed.

“I’ve done all these nice things for you. Now it’s time to pay me back,” he told her.

She first told him no, but he threatened to kill her and her family if she didn’t comply. So she reluctantly agreed and entered a world of prostitution, cocaine and strip clubs.

A minor and the victim of numerous sex crimes, Jennifer’s identity is not being disclosed; her first name was changed for her protection because her pimp is still at large and the criminal investigation against him is still open. She represents one of dozens of victims of child sex trafficking in Clark County, a crime believed to be rampant in Portland but one that’s only gained attention here in the past few years.

Over the past three years, police in Clark County have seen child sex trafficking emerge as one of the major crimes to watch. It’s no longer just a Portland problem. Fueled by online ads, johns and girls will routinely travel between Vancouver and Portland for “dates,” making the crime a regional issue.

In Clark County, police estimate about 50 children are being sold for sex, compared with 150 to 200 in Portland. Those estimates could be lower than the reality, police said, because many victims don’t self-report.

“If you would have asked me three years ago about child sex trafficking (in Clark County), I would say, ‘You’re crazy,’” said Clark County sheriff’s Sgt. Duncan Hoss. “I was pretty amazed at how big the prostitution world was in general. It’s really the upcoming industry.”

## Narrow escape

Those who fall victim to child sex trafficking don't all fit the cliché of being runaways or foster children, police said.

Another girl, Brianna, narrowly escaped being trafficked in December 2009. A star athlete and honor student, she met her would-be pimp when he stopped at the restaurant she worked at in La Center.

Initially persuading her to come to Seattle to party with college-age boys, he had other plans in mind. He coaxed her to dance two nights at a strip club and then hand over most of the money to him. When he urged her to come to Arizona with him to make more money selling her body, Brianna's ex-boyfriend intervened, alerting her family and law enforcement.

Brianna, now a 19-year-old college student, said the ordeal made a lasting impression on how she can trust people now.

"It's hard to befriend anyone my age," she said. "They just don't get it. It's just like I have had to grow up a lot in the last few years."

Six months prior to Brianna's ordeal, Hoss and Vancouver police Sgt. John Chapman said they were blind to the problem of trafficking. That's when, at the nudging of Portland police detectives, police conducted a special investigation of hotels along Chkalov Drive in east Vancouver. Expecting to uncover a drug ring, instead they found evidence of human trafficking.

Chapman and Hoss dug more. They underwent a training session that year put on by the Oregon Human Trafficking Task Force and began meeting with Shared Hope International, a Vancouver organization that combats global sexual slavery. Then, that October, Vancouver police participated in the FBI's sting, Operation Cross Country, along with other law enforcement agencies in the metro area.

The results were surprising. Vancouver authorities recovered two juvenile sex workers — the same number as found in Portland.

The figures, however, weren't surprising to Portland police.

"We encounter them significantly moving between Portland and Vancouver," said Portland police Sgt. Mike Geiger. "It's a very easy drive from Vancouver to the Portland area. It's not a static kind of circumstance."

With this new awareness has come harsher penalties for pimps and johns in Washington. In 2010, Linda Smith, former congresswoman and founder of Shared Hope International, successfully championed a bill to more than double the sentencing range for promotion of commercial sexual abuse of a minor, from 21 to 44 months to 93 to 318 months. For buyers of sex, the penalties increased to 21 to 144 months, up from one to 68 months under former sentencing guidelines.

Still, police and civic leaders say there's much more to be done, namely resources for the juveniles.

There are no safe houses for victims in Washington or Oregon, something crucial for girls trying to escape the prostitution lifestyle and the grip of their pimp.

"We're making steps," Hoss said. "We're just not quite there with the whole package yet."

## Then and now

Chapman and Hoss said that before their training, detectives weren't aware of the warning signs of trafficking. They'd received reports about frequent runaway girls, often traveling with older men, but wouldn't view it as a possible child sex trafficking case.

Other occurrences, like a girl receiving expensive jewelry or other lavish gifts from an older man, also weren't thought of as warning signs. Now, Chapman said, detectives and patrol officers know what to look for.

Chapman also investigates the crime by trolling online ads of sex workers. His department also receives referrals from juvenile probation counselors and from organizations such as the YWCA Clark County and Oregon Sexual Assault Resource Center.

A boost for law enforcement was the addition of Kay Vail, a Clark County juvenile probation counselor now fully devoted to child sex trafficking cases, thanks to a federal grant.

Vail counsels a small group of girls (so far, there have been no identified male victims in Clark County). Those girls came through the system as runaways or after being charged with a crime. If they say they were trafficked, probation officials will refer the cases to Vail.

Vail said she sees a lot of similarity between cases. Girls who are addicted to drugs and alcohol or in foster care are especially prone to becoming prostitutes. But, she said, she also has been surprised at how far-reaching the crime can be. She's counseled girls who were straight-A students and came from a good home.

One of the key traits in the victims, she has observed, is vulnerability. They are girls who can be groomed easily by the pimps — those who are especially responsive to compliments, expensive gifts and attention.

"A lot of (the pimps) start out as the boyfriend," she said.

That poses the same setbacks as domestic violence victims: They are emotionally attached to their abusers and often don't want to pursue prosecution against them, she said.

"Sometimes they feel very alienated," Vail said. "A lot of times, they start out way tough" and she has to break through a barrier.

Long-term support is exactly what police, social workers and Smith of Shared Hope say is missing in the fight against child sex trafficking.

Vail estimates that about 80 percent of her girls have stable homes. Still, many victims need an anonymous, secure place to go.

Smith said those safe havens are rare; there are only a few in the United States specified for trafficking victims.

Across the river, Janus Youth Programs helped the Oregon Sexual Assault Resource Center secure funding for seven beds at an undisclosed location. That's a small step in the right direction, said Esther Nelson, program manager for SARC's commercially sexually exploited children division. "Most of them are living in very unsafe situations," she said.

## Jennifer's story

By all accounts, Jennifer's life was far from dangerous until the eighth grade. She was good student, receiving As and Bs, and had several friends at her Clark County middle school.

A striking 16-year-old girl with cropped hair and steely eyes, she sat in a coffee shop on a recent afternoon with Sgt. Chapman and her mother, and shared her story.

Jennifer said her ordeal started out like this: One night, she sneaked away from home to a party, where she met the man who later became her pimp. "He was cute. He had nice watches," she said. "He was like LL Cool J." She was 13 at the time.

Without telling her mother, Jennifer began dating the man — until it suddenly turned dark.

“It was a few months until I realized it wasn’t a relationship and he had other girls,” she said. “I started lying to myself and saying, ‘He did this (for me), so I’ll do this’” for him.

She started meeting men for “dates” and working Portland’s 82nd Avenue strip. Her rate was \$100 an hour, which would all go to him. She became addicted to cocaine at age 14.

Jennifer’s mother said she saw the change in her daughter, but she had no idea about the pimp. “I thought she was just acting out because (Jennifer’s father and I) were divorcing,” she said. “It would be 8 or 9 at night and she wouldn’t be home from school.”

At first, Jennifer would tell her mom she was spending the weekend at a friend’s house, and then sneak to her pimp’s apartment. Then, she started running away for longer periods.

One night an officer broke the news to Jennifer’s mom. He told her mom to look at a certain website and scan the ads of sex workers. In disbelief, her mom looked, but couldn’t find her daughter.

Meanwhile, Jennifer told her pimp she didn’t want to work for him anymore. After an argument that including him slapping her, he kicked her out of his apartment.

Jennifer was found by an officer wandering Portland’s 82nd Avenue. The officer took her home. But a fight with her mom over her cellphone, in which she assaulted her mother, landed her in juvenile hall.

She was referred to probation counselor Vail, who gave her a book, “Renting Lacy,” about the life of one child sex worker. Vail helped her start breaking down her walls.

Then, in June 2010, her location was leaked to her pimp. One of his friends came to where she was staying and beat and sexually assaulted her.

Her attacker was convicted and sent to prison.

But Jennifer’s pimp is still at large. For her protection, Shared Hope found and sent Jennifer to a girl’s school on the East Coast. She spent nine months there before coming home in August. Her family now lives in Oregon.

Since being home, Jennifer is working to obtain her GED and wants to use her experience to help other victims.

“Many girls think I’m a criminal for doing those things,” she said. “Telling anyone is like suicide.”

Jennifer and her mom both agree she has a long way to go in the healing process. When she gets nervous, she sucks her thumb and tries to laugh at the circumstances, while her mom cries.

The process of recovery can take years, acknowledged Brianna. Her heart goes out to Jennifer.

Looking back on herself in her high school years, Brianna thinks girls are especially vulnerable because they’re still sorting out their identity. She thinks finding direction is a key to moving on.

“Your life comes with purpose,” she said. “The number one thing is finding self-respect for yourself and finding something that makes you purposeful.”

Brianna said she is finding that purpose by volunteering for Shared Hope and in her school studies; she plans to become a nurse. It’s an ongoing process.

“My life has just completely changed for the better,” she said.

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